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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 006550

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/17/2015

TAGS: PGOV PREL ECON PINR KWBG IS ELECTIONS GOI INTERNAL

SUBJECT: (C) LABOR MINISTER SAYS LABOR WILL LOSE TO SHARON;
CALLS "CONVERGENCE" KEY TO PEACE

REF: TEL AVIV 06460

Classified By: Acting Economic Counselor Jason Witow, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Labor MK and Science Minister Matan Vilnai told NEA DAS Robert Danin November 16 that "thousands" of Labor Party members will vote for Prime Minister Sharon in 2006 elections rather than support new Labor Chair Amir Peretz. Vilnai said the "Peretz revolution" was "too much from the left" at a time that most Israelis want a PM who rules from the center. Sharon, he said, had succeeded in pushing Labor to the left. Vilnai predicted that Sharon will remain in the Likud if Shimon Peres stays with Labor. Vilnai, who had supported Peres for the chairmanship won by Peretz, lamented that only 800 votes would have kept Shimon Peres as leader of Labor. He also commented that Sharon was "doing the right things in the right way," adding that Labor should be looking to fight Sharon's successor, because Sharon himself would be too hard for Labor to beat in 2006.

2. (C) Asked whether he thought Israel should take unilateral steps to disengage from the West Bank, Vilnai, a retired general with over thirty years of military service, commented that he was worried about "a new terror phase" if there is not sustained momentum. He said the Palestinian Authority was not strong enough to handle all its problems, or at a minimum had a leader who believed he was not strong enough. Touching on history, Vilnai said the Six Day War created the illusion that Israel was a superpower, but in the Yom Kippur War, Israel had "won the battles but lost the war." Since then, Israel had been giving back territory to become stronger.

3. (C) Vilnai said peace required a "new convergence" on Israel's part, with a concurrent return to "real Israeli values." Israel needed to cooperate with the Palestinians according to a grand strategy, he said, with borders that realistically reflected Israel's strength (the core element of the "convergence" concept). He suggested that such borders would encompass the main settlement blocks and roughly correspond to American proposals from 2000. Claiming that he had originally opposed unilateralism in Gaza but was proven wrong, Vilnai said he was against a unilateral approach on the West Bank, but allowed that unilateral action might prove necessary.

4. (U) DAS Danin cleared this message.

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JONES